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Family Recipe

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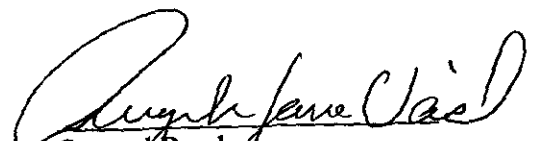
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"Family Recipe"

Christin Grow

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Master of Arts
Department of English,
Seton Hall University

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Thesis Mentor
Second Reader

Family Recipe

Fiona grew up in Allentown—in Gram’s and Pop’s one-story, red brick home on Bradford Street across from Al. To Fiona he was uncle though, and still to me, a generation younger. When I required Gram as a babysitter, Mondays and Fridays, and sometimes days in between, Al would stop by for tea in the mid-summer afternoons—his worn, lime green and pastel blue plaid shorts that alternated with only a single pair of khakis, creases ever visible down the center of each leg, front and back. His beard, always neatly combed, never surpassing the quarter of an inch below his chin. And his hat, forest green and netted in the back, plush in the front—almost foamlike, embroidered with the Knights of Columbus logo.

Al never knocked for tea. He quietly let himself in, passing through the rear porch, even then leaning heavily on a cane, up the concrete steps to the unlocked back door. The porch is enclosed in glass, a small wooden plaque with three hooks beneath hanging from the wall to the left of the door. Hand-etched into the plaque are the words *céad míle fáilte*. A longer wooden scroll of stained birch hangs on the door, an Irish blessing engraved in calligraphy: *God bless the corners of this house, and be the lintel blest. And bless the hearth and bless the board, and bless each place of rest.* In Gram’s version of the story, the plaque was a wedding gift, hung as soon as they closed on the house. Now, the house is part of a larger lot that my grandfather eventually split in half, between him and Gram and my uncle and aunt, who afterward built a house just across the yard. Their doors are locked for just two reasons: sleep and vacation. Uncle Al habitually entered my grandparents’ house, quite dependant on that routine, hanging his green Knights of Columbus hat on a hook below the plaque and kissing his fingertips before touching them to the scroll on the door — a ritual I later analyzed to be quite as ridiculous as, albeit slightly more sanitary than, kissing the Blarney Stone. I had memorized Uncle Al’s motions

down to the last footstep, having customarily watched him from either the window seat in the attic above or the patch of lawn near the birdbath in the backyard.

In retrospect, it was likely that Gram had been lonely during those years between Fie and her four siblings having grown—gone off to college and begun careers and families of their own—and Pop having retired to their home permanently. Uncle Al was a number of years older than my grandparents, and long retired from his job with AT&T, where my grandfather remained until my tenth birthday. And so, afternoons we spent with Al, drinking tea and, on rare occasions, playing chess. He always smelt of an odd combination of cinnamon sticks and laundry detergent. It was a scent that emanated off of him, seeping into the fibers of my clothing and in between the strands of my hair, both of which absorbed it as quickly and nauseatingly as they did the smell of Pop's cigars—infrequent though they were. When Fiona would pick me up in the evenings on afternoon tea days, she would give me a kiss, tussle my hair, cough, and ask, "How is Uncle Al, sweetie?" I would respond by offering up part of a treat that he routinely snuck inside my jacket pockets, sometimes pieces of licorice or strawberry-flavored hard candy — the kind that, once I sucked on it for a bit, had a gummy center that made the candy soft to chew and, eventually, melt into my tongue and drain down the back of my throat like Gram's homemade fruit juice. I grew accustomed to this ritual, particularly when for a number of years, long after I was born and Fiona was grown, the two of us lived in the bedroom adjacent to that of my grandparents' in their Bradford Street home. So it was, I suppose, that I spent the better portion of my childhood under my grandparents' roof, just as Fiona did.

Then, I imagine, the house and yard were not much different from what they are now. Admittedly, I know little about Fiona's childhood except for what facts trickle down in forms of jokes and photographs from previous generations. I know that, as a teenager, she chipped one of her front teeth and got two knees full of gravel by being knocked forward over the handles of her

bicycle when she was racing her brother over the train tracks near the fish hatchery. I know that Pop kept a belt in the shed in the back of the house and whipped Fiona and her brothers and sisters good when they deserved it — usually for taunting one another, for not sharing, and, once, her brother, for cutting through the wood seat of the swing set out back with a saw. Of course, Pop later took to whipping me as well. My first offense was climbing the two white Dogwood trees on his lawn. There were many following, most of which involved scheming between me and my cousin Shane—I being quite the tomboy, much in Fiona's likeness, when I was younger. The most common of our transgressions—though I must admit to being held as the guiltier of the two of us— was to ride a pair of bicycles down to a cul-de-sac, the hub of endless streams of construction, mostly of housing developments. We'd ride the bikes up and down mounds of synthetic soil, holding contests of who could perform the best tricks. For me, this generally meant returning to my grandparents' house filthy and with scrapes and bruises covering my legs — as well as, on more than one occasion, a flattened bicycle tire. Of Fiona, I also know that, when a male classmate called to talk with her on her sixteenth birthday, my grandfather exclaimed, "She's not allowed to talk to boys on the phone," and hung up. Years later, the classmate married, had children with, and divorced another woman. Fiona blamed Pop for that. I went to elementary school with one of the kids, Katie. Years after the fact, Fiona fantasized aloud to me about the army man who got away.

I'm sad to say that I can't recall any secondhand memories of Gram and Fiona when she was younger—except for what I could conjecture from a few black and white photographs I collected, mostly taken of the two of them on a beach, Fiona with a sand pail and Gram in a oversized, floppy sun hat. During the second hour of the Monday evening viewing, I found myself pondering this fact—after spending near the entirety of the first hour frozen in my second-row seat, staring at the unrecognizable, thin, pale form in the casket in front of me. I gazed blankly at the friends and family members that knelt in front of her frail body, silently shaking hands with those I knew. Many

of her friends I did not recognize. Family members, I knew, but there were many to whom I'd never spoken. After Al paid his respects, he lingered for a few moments with Fiona. She bent over slightly, allowing him to hug her and kiss her forehead. Al, on the balls of his feet with Fiona hunched over, glanced past her shoulder toward me. We spoke for a few minutes afterward, though the conversation remains fragmented in my mind. He gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, smiling and, however inappropriately, passing me two strawberry-flavored hard candies. "She was a wonderful woman, Sophia. Don't forget." Those were the words that stuck with me as we said our goodbyes. I placed the hard candies in my pocket and gave him a kiss on the cheek in return.

Every now and again, I'd feel a lump in my throat, and Jake, standing next to me, would stroke his thumb back and forth across the inside of my left palm. For most of the evening we didn't speak to one another, although, when our silence was interrupted by a family member, we would chat at request about the save-the-date cards for our summer wedding that had gone out in the mail just a month earlier. *Yes, we would be married in the Church. No, the ceremony would not be in Pennsylvania.* After each of them—Gram's and Pop's fourteen brothers and sisters, a number which does not include spouses (and all but four of them have husbands or wives)—gave me a hug and rounded out our small talk, they formed a crowd in the back of the room, a few of them spilling over into the hallway and lobby of the funeral home. Distantly, I could hear loud voices and laughter, casual conversation like one might have over afternoon tea, my great aunts and uncles—with Al and his hard candies among them—keeping one another's company and spirits.

By the time another half hour had passed, I was able to suppress the echoing, upbeat chatter and divert my gaze from the photographic and floral displays situated about the front of the room, only to have it rest persistently on Fiona. For the better length of the evening, her posture remained stoic, but every now and again, when a weepy relative approached her with an outstretched hand or

open arms, her shoulders and head would quake, and I knew she was crying — if only ever so slightly.

The funeral followed on Tuesday — it was September 22nd. Afterward, the family and I went to the local Knights of Columbus and had beers and Bailey's-dressed coffees with our breakfast.

* * *

The air conditioning was on when we entered the dining room of the Knights of Columbus, jackets in hand. Fiona took a seat with her siblings at a far table, and the great aunts and uncles reserved three larger, adjacent tables for themselves. Uncle Al continued to mingle among them, and I found myself following suit. After we were seated and the waiters and waitresses began to pour our coffees, which a few topped off with a shot of whiskey, the upbeat chatter I overheard the evening before resumed. Uncle Al was the first to talk.

"Sophia—you know, I never quite got over how much you look like your mother, and like Caroline."

"Yes, yes that's true," a few echoed.

"Your eyes. The hazel. Just like Caroline's."

"Thanks. I guess that's a good thing."

I felt my cheeks flush red.

"It's a good thing," Rosemary, Caroline's older sister, winked.

A sister-in-law, Margaret, peeked her head up from her cup of coffee.

"How is your mother, Sophia?"

"She's having a tough time, I know. It's hard for her, being alone in that house."

"I can only imagine. The poor woman."

"I wouldn't say that," Uncle Al looked to Margaret and shook his head, pausing for a moment to return his coffee cup to its saucer before turning toward me. "You're mom, Sophia, she's a strong lady."

I continued to nurse the coffee in my hand as he talked.

"Did you know I was there in the hospital the day you were born?"

I shook my head.

"It's a tough thing for a person to do, what your mom did with you. But we always knew she would, from the very beginning. It's in her blood. Stubbornness, that is."

"Well, I don't know about stubbornness, but certainly determination." Rosemary dumped a packet of sugar into her coffee cup and began to stir.

"Oh, of course stubbornness," Danny, her brother, chimed in. "The exact stubbornness Caroline had—perhaps too trusting at times. Al, you ought to remember when Fiona told Caroline and Ed she was going to marry the grocery-store boy. You remember Fiona's wedding?"

"To Sophia's father. Yes, of course."

"Jimmy."

"Yes."

"Oh, Caroline loved that poor man. Took pity on him, really."

"No, no," Rosemary and Daniel echoed one another, chuckling. "'There's something good inside of everyone,' she always said."

Margaret nodded, "Yes, always thought like that. That's what made her such a great person."

"Yes," Uncle Al said, "but if ever she was wrong." His voice trailed off.

I leaned back into the red, plush cushion that lined my seat, having lost interest in the coffee.

"Aren't you going to finish yours?" Al chuckled and nudged me with his elbow. The waitress had returned to clear a few plates that harvested the remains of abandoned soda bread. Before she

could slip away, Al caught her glance, “Miss, I’m sorry—can I get a little more coffee? Make it Irish, please.” Turning back to the table, he smiled. “Now, where were we?”

* * *

[Nov. 1984]

Parked just north and out of sight of her parents’ house on Bradford Street, Fiona twirled the ring on her left hand a few times before settling on whether or not the diamond should remain facing her palm. *Yes, it should.* It was a small jewel, only a bit more than a quarter of a carat—emerald cut, set in yellow gold. It was not particularly eye-catching, but she had the notion she ought to break the news to her parents gently and vocally rather than by show—although that was the manner in which she chose to impart the news on her friends. Fiona took a deep breath and a minute or two to make sure she had turned off everything in the green Chevy: the radio, though they had been sitting in silence; the headlights and windshield wipers, though the sun was shining.

“What are you doing?” Jimmy mumbled from the passenger-side seat.

“Nothing. Are you ready?”

“Sure. You?”

“I suppose.”

Fiona closed the top button on her jacket and, after fiddling with the half-broken handle, kicked the car door open. Jimmy watched for a few moments before following suit. When he eventually emerged from the car, Fiona caught eye of him in full length: the brown shoes, the khakis she had pressed for him the evening before, and the green button-down shirt they had picked out at a strip mall the week past, Fiona thinking the color brought out Jimmy’s eyes. Remembering the razor blades she left in his apartment yesterday, Fiona took notice, being too nervous to do so earlier, that his mustache, thicker than his already-receding hairline, was trimmed back neatly and that his cheeks were clean shaven. He swung a corduroy jacket over his right shoulder after shutting

the car door, throwing himself bare-armed against an icy breeze that sent chills all the way through Fiona's fingernails. As she saw him, Jimmy resembled one of her Barbie's counterparts, long since stashed away in a cardboard box in her bedroom at the Bradford house.

"Come on, Jim. Ready? You look nice."

"I guess. The buttons on this collar make me feel like I'm suffocating. I can't breathe."

"It's okay. We won't be long."

Fiona moved in closer to him, wrapping her arms around his back and pressing her forehead against his cheek. He wobbled slightly off balance, leaning against the car to stabilize himself. She looked up, attempting to peck his lips, but, as he leaned backward, she instead noticed a hint of leftover shaving cream behind his earlobe.

Smiling, she teased, "You missed a spot."

Jimmy looked content for a moment. Then, rolling his eyes and turning his head, he tried to tug free from her embrace. Instead, she pulled him closer, nuzzling her nose in his pink cheek.

"C'mon. Are we going in or not?"

He reached for the inside pocket of his corduroy jacket, where he kept a pack of Camel nonfilters, but Fiona intercepted the cigarette that emerged before it could reach his lips.

"Not the time or place, Jim. Don't you think?"

"No. What difference does it make?"

He coughed, and Fiona caught the scent of something sharp, as if a bottle of VapoRub had been passed underneath her nose. For a moment before remembering that Jimmy shaved earlier in the day, Fiona contemplated if he had taken a swig of his own aftershave, now expelling the fumes into the cool wind, itself extreme for a September afternoon. Her heart quickened in pace, pounding like a hammer against a piece of plywood, bending her rib cage to the brink of its elasticity before she softened, admitting that the thought was absurd.

“You must not have washed your face very well after you shaved this morning—I can still smell the rubbing alcohol you use on your cheeks.”

Jimmy was silent, intently grabbing and replacing the cigarette in his pocket.

“Okay. Well, let’s go,” I said, tugging him away from my car.

Fiona reached for his hand to hold, but he was fiddling with the top collar button of his shirt. At the back porch, when both of his hands were still fidgeting at his neck, she slapped them down as if he were a child insistent on biting his fingernails.

“Oh, come on...”

“Shh... We’re here.”

Fiona jostled the black handle, but the screen door leading into the back porch was locked. Slipping in quietly was apparently out of the question.

“Okay, then,” she sighed, to herself moreso than to Jimmy. “I guess we’ll have to ring the bell.”

“Don’t you have a key?”

But Fiona ignored him, ringing the doorbell, both of them standing face-forward in silence, as if awaiting Confirmation. Jimmy rocked back and forth between his heels and toes, creating folds in the brown leather of his shoes. After a few minutes passed in quiet, he walked across the lawn to the tool shed and then the garden—staring for a few moments at the bare, harvested ground. Around the edge, the soil appeared soft, recently tilled. Fiona watching, Jimmy pressed his toes into the dirt and began twisting his foot, back and forth, flattening the soil like her mom’s cookie dough under the weight of a rolling pin. Unsatisfied with the result, he began walking along the stone border, as if it were a balance beam, turning up any loose soil at will with his left shoe. After a few flips of his foot, Jimmy unearthed the brown, pointy end of a plant, what Fiona recognized to be the top of a bulb. She cringed.

“Jimmy, please don’t—. You’re going to get the bottom of your pants dirty.”

He bent down to lift up his pant legs, the khaki already speckled brown, and hopped off of the stone into the dirt. Staring, first at her and then the ground, he dropped the pant legs, which dragged under his heels as he crouched over to pick up a few unlucky seeds that had fallen on the stone border, never planted, and then paced back and forth across the length of the garden three or four times before hurling the seeds into the neighbor’s yard and walking back in Fiona’s direction.

“Any answer?” Jimmy asked, placing a hand on Fiona’s left shoulder.

“Nope.”

Fiona had known Jimmy for a few years during which impatient, childish quirks—such as his propensity for pacing and touching renounced objects—gradually emerged. She rested her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. She told herself that, although she was well aware of their differences, those were what made them work so well as a couple. Jimmy was carefree when Fiona obligated; he calm when she nervous. Dealing with these disparities in thought, however, became overwhelming—and it was nearly impossible for Jimmy to understand her anxiety in most situations.

Fiona waited for a full five minutes, checking that her parents’ silver Chevy was in the carport, before even contemplating ringing the bell again. Heralding her chance, a scuffling sound echoed from behind the door. Her dad’s slippers. It was a Saturday around 4:00, and Fiona expected that he and Caroline had finished up with dinner not too long ago. She turned to straighten Jimmy’s jacket just as the door swung open.

“Fiona? What are you doing standing there?”

“Dad! I missed you.”

Edward, being a tall, lanky man, had to bend over to reach out and usher her in with his freckled, right arm from the steps inside. He wore wide-framed reading glasses on most days—although, on this occasion, likely having been napping, he held them in his hand. His navy blue

work pants were accented by a pair of black slippers and a white tee shirt that he bought from a Wal-Mart store in the early 1970s—after Fiona's youngest sister, Gretchen, was born. His hair was a heavy brown, already fading into a deep grey.

"We rang the bell, but no one answered. I figured you and Mom might have taken a walk."

"Your Mother's in the attic pulling out our winter jackets and such, and I was just looking for a screwdriver. Come in—it's pretty cool out there."

He held the screen door, allowing Fiona to pass under his arm, and handed it to Jimmy, who followed behind, Edward nodding to acknowledge his presence. The loose soil that clung to Jimmy's pants in the garden now fell on the freshly waxed kitchen steps as he entered the house.

"Dad, you've met Jim, no?"

"Yes, of course. The boy from the supermarket, right?"

Fiona pretended not to hear Edward's comment, and continued toward the living room, asking about AT&T and his soon-to-be retirement from the company where he worked for more than thirty years. During the 1980s, Jimmy worked at a local Aldi bagging groceries and shelving stock. Although Fiona met him during her sophomore year of Lafayette at a house party, he didn't attend college, and didn't have plans to do so. Jimmy, who barely graduated high school, wasn't a proponent of college and often wondered about her need to pursue a degree, her B.A., in Business Administration.

"You know what that stands for," he would say. "Ba, Ba, Bullshit."

According to Jimmy, attending college was for people who were dissatisfied with their lives, and he was more than happy with his. His joke was funny, though only partially true, but the security the degree granted Fiona made up for her lack of interesting job prospects. Either way, she preferred the stability of pursuing a college degree and traditional family: those were the goals. And, those were the same goals that Edward had approved for her.

One of the things that Fiona loved most about Jimmy at the time, though, was his simplicity. He didn't need much to be happy. He was rarely discontent, despite the uncommon, sporadic phases of irritation—like with his top collar button—or anger that came and went. Fiona admired this attitude, and his ability to take risks. Jimmy was free where she was not; he could do what he wanted, as he wanted—whether that was to take a few weeks off work to hike through parts of the Appalachian Trail or to make an unplanned road trip to Florida with a buddy in his parents' old Buick LeSabre. Fiona told him that, one day, she wanted him to take her to the mountains—the Appalachian Trail. She wanted to see Pennsylvania from a hawk's perspective. He agreed, albeit, I think, reluctantly. I suspected, at least, with her, he was not as free as he desired, and that made me and Fiona uneasy at times.

The coal stove was on in the dining room when Fiona passed by, the flames dancing inside of it, emanating heat in a radius of just four or five feet. Stepping into the living room, she felt a chill down her spine. Edward ushered Fiona and Jimmy to the sofa, quickly offering the two a couple of glasses of water.

"I have to get back to the workshed soon. Did you need something?"

"Actually, I was kind of hoping I could talk with you and Mom for a few minutes."

"Well, alright—. I'll go get her."

Edward motioned toward the attic, and Fiona showed Jim the couch. It was an odd combination of orange, yellow, and red—a little too much orange and a fairly unpleasant shade of yellow. The upholstery was rough and chaffed the backs of Fiona's bare calves. She brushed them off and picked up the copy of *Time* on the coffee table in front of her—an election special. Reagan's photo was on the cover along with the headline: "Reagan's Triumph: What It Means to America." Fiona turned to the T. H. White article and began lightly skimming—and, at a turning point, staring. As if she were looking into a kaleidoscope, the words began to blur together after a few seconds,

transforming before her eyes into tens, hundreds of tiny shapes—triangles, circles, squares, even stars—and intermingling, twirling clockwise, first slowly, and then more quickly. When Fiona started to feel sick, she put down the magazine and rested her head on the sofa cushion behind her, staring upward at the ceiling. She felt a tingling on her thigh and looked down to see Jimmy's fingers dancing across it, up from the knee, gracefully and enticingly. He looked deep into her eyes just as Fiona heard footsteps coming down the stairs to the attic. Panicking, she used the back of her left palm to slap his hand off of her thigh and into his lap.

“You’ve got to stop that.”

Jimmy leaned a bent elbow on the corner of the couch and let his head rest in his palm.

“I’m sorry. I just want to get through this,” Fiona muttered, her voice tapering off, and popped up to greet her mother with a hug when she rounded the corner from the master bedroom, near the entrance to the attic. She locked stares with her mother for but a moment—until Caroline gave Fiona a squeeze and diverted her gaze to the sofa.

“James! So good to see you, dear. How are you?”

“Fine, thank you, Mrs. Kennedy.”

He remained seated, but Caroline, intent on a proper greeting, directed him to stand up.

“Jim, come now. Give me a hug. I’m not the young woman I once was.”

He stood up, brushing the corduroy jacket onto the sofa, and awkwardly folded his arms around her shoulders for a few seconds before retreating to the corner of the couch. Fiona’s parents had taken seats in their recliners across from her and Jimmy on the sofa. Edward sat, impassive and quiet. Caroline looked on the two for a bit, smiling.

“So, Jim, what is it you’ve been up to? You’re still at Aldi, I know. I saw you there just the other day. They have such good prices there.”

Jimmy was quiet.

“Mom, Jim may be up for a promotion to grocery supervisor. Isn’t that great?”

“Oh, wow. That’s terrific. Is that true, Jim?”

“Yes, Mrs. Kennedy.”

Caroline nodded and rocked in the recliner.

“So what brings you here today, Fie? You don’t have classes on a Saturday, I’m certain.”

“No, I don’t. Actually, we were just hoping to share some good news with you.”

Edward stared at Fiona from his recliner. His eyes dilated and flashed solid black.

“Have you been looking into those cars I told you to? Are you buying one? I keep telling you that you need to do that—”

“No actually, Dad, I haven’t had the chance quite yet.”

“I think some of them are real nice though,” Jimmy chimed into the conversation.

“Ah, I don’t know too much about cars, dear,” Caroline glanced toward Edward. “Let’s hear what she’s come here for, then.”

“Well, Mom, Dad—”

“What she’s trying to say is—”

“Oh no, Jim. I mean—What I meant to say is Jimmy’s asked me to marry him, and I said yes. We’re engaged.”

“Goodness. Fiona, that’s great news! Congratulations, to the both of you,” Caroline said, popping up to hug Jimmy first, and then Fiona. Edward remained in his armchair. Fiona pulled back from the hug with her mother, grabbing her shoulders to give her a kiss on the cheek, smiling all the while.

“Oh, this is wonderful!” Caroline turned back toward Jimmy. “I guess you’ll be my son-in-law, then, no?”

“Yes, ma—”

“Of course. You’ll be the third, but I just know you’ll be special. Oh, we’ll have so much to discuss, Fiona. Ed, go give your daughter a hug! Don’t you have anything to say?”

“Well, you seem to have said it all so well yourself, dear. But, congratulations, Fiona. I just remembered, though, I left a candle burning downstairs above my tool table. I’ll have to go put that out. Back in a few minutes, dear, I promise.”

Fiona watched her father as he got up to walk away, turning near the coal stove to process down the stairs into the cellar. She heard him whisper below his breath when he was still within earshot, though Caroline insisted not: “It won’t last.”

“Oh, don’t mind him, Fiona. It’s just the cold. Get’s to him, you know.”

* * *

Two months after the funeral, Fiona’s boyfriend’s mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer in her lungs and liver. I got the call on the 17th, the precise anniversary of her passing. Fiona had been avoiding my calls for a week or more, and I left messages here and there—but I’d never hear back. It made sense for a few days—I assumed that she would be visiting Pop, to keep him company as he drank his Guinness. “One a day, that’s all I let myself have,” he’d say—but the black and gold cans would appear in his recycling bin at a rate more rapid than that.

I thought, perhaps, that Fiona and her siblings drank with him from time to time, mostly Fiona, but also her brother, Josh. When I went with her to visit, we would sit around the brown dining room table in front of the coal stove, each with a beer in hand, complaining about the greed and uselessness of the health insurance industry or the skimpy vacation policies our respective human resource departments distribute and our bosses enforce. It seemed true enough that misery does love company, and, without much thought, I dwelled in it. It was, after all, healthy to mourn the death of a loved one. And that’s what we’d do—mourn.

It got to a point, though, that Fiona's distance began to concern me. It was unlike her to avoid my calls. On most days, she would answer without question, whether at work, in the grocery store, or on the treadmill. There were few other women in her life—and mine—and, although I would never admit it to her face, she was my best friend. And so, after a few days, I thought about going to see her. But before the opportunity arose, I got a text message, apologizing for, though not entirely explaining, her absence. She would call me later, or so she said, since she'd been unusually overwhelmed that week with work. On a Tuesday, after twelve days of silence, she did call.

"I'm sorry. It's Ray—his mom. She's sick."

My stomach churned when she said it. It was too soon after.

"The biopsy results won't be in until tomorrow afternoon, but the doctors think that it's terminal."

"Oh God."

"I know. It's just—. All of these things happening. Just makes me question my faith."

"Fie. Listen to me. This is just an unfortunate coincidence, and it's certainly not you. For Christ's sake, you've never even met his mother!"

If it was insensitive, I couldn't have helped it. Fiona and Ray had been dating on and off for years. They had broken up five or six times, maybe more—I'm not sure. I lost count after the first three. The reasons were petty, more often than not. Ray had not been sensitive enough. Fiona had been too easily agitated. Ray had called too often, or too frequently. Fiona had been too consumed with work, or too with Ray. The other times, though, were a product of Ray's infidelity—his lack of commitment. I still remember the last of the breakups. His children, two boys and a girl, my age, set him up with their mother, as an intervention—asked them to see a therapist, go to counseling, anything. Ray took it as a sign from God.

"He's calling me back to her," he said.

“What do you mean, he’s calling you?” Fiona retorted, appalled.

“It’s just that. Everything happens for a reason.”

“Don’t you dare say those words—my Mom’s,” she sobbed. “This isn’t God’s plan. This is, this is a—”

“This is what, Fiona? A mistake? How could you—”

But it was futile to try and talk her out of recuperating the relationship when there was such an opportunity, and so I learned to endure it in silence, chiming in only for the needed heartwarming every now and again.

“It’s still horrible, and there’s nothing anyone can do for her—for him.”

“Yes, you’re right. It is horrible, but listen to me Fiona. All you can do is be there for him. That’s all.”

I could hear her choking back sobs.

“It’s hard. I miss my Mom so much, you know. And the holidays—”

“I know. But go spend time with Pop, be there for *him*. We’re a family. You have to take care of yourself, of *your* family, Fie. Promise me that you won’t go to the hospital tomorrow.”

Fiona first met Ray through the school board. Initially, I think, they fell into mutual loneliness. Six months after graduation, and two months into Boston College, I found out through a friend of a friend. Fiona never told me about the relationship. It was later assumed that I knew—after a dozen quiet phone calls taken aside in my presence, and a few times when she let his name slip. In an attempt to rectify the situation, Fiona took us both out for Indian food two days before Thanksgiving that year. At dinner, Ray and I talked, superficially albeit, about food preferences and college coursework.

“You know, I went to Columbia? Bet you didn’t think I was smart,” he chuckled.

At the thought, I remember feeling my nose crinkle, suddenly disgusted with my chicken makhani—I dropped the meat from my fork into my rice and poured the tomato and ginger sauce over top, swirling it together, creating patterns with the red liquid in the starch: first an S, which turned into a figure 8, and then a snowman with a top hat.

“What’s wrong—cat got your tongue?”

Fiona giggled.

“No. Just feeling a bit ill is all.”

I stared at my plate.

“So, what sorts of embarrassing stories can we tell about you, Sophia?” he smirked.

I laughingly told Al, and my great aunts and uncles, about our dinner with Ray after Caroline’s funeral. We joked at the time: Some are never lucky in love. Caroline was. Fiona wasn’t.

In the days after the phone call, Fiona grew less distant, pulled back to me. One night, she called, her voice soft, timid.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

The two of us sat on an open line in silence for a few minutes before Fiona grew the courage to talk again.

“I was going through some albums, found some pictures of the day you were born. Don’t think you’ve ever seen them. There’s one of you and Gram I thought you might like to have. A few of you and Uncle Al, too.”

“Yea, I’d like that,” I nodded, as if she could see me smiling.

“I thought I had one of you and your dad. I was going to mail that to you—Lord knows I don’t want it—but I can’t find it.”

“It’s alright. I don’t really need one.”

When I drove out to Fiona’s house for Christmas—the first without Caroline—we made chocolate chip cookies and hot cocoa with peppermint, and sat in front of the fire paging through the faded black-and-whites—a story for each photograph.

* * *

[Nov. 1986]

Fiona turned on her right side to see the bright red lights of the clock flashing 12:00. It was still dark out. She flung her left arm to the opposite side of the bed, curious of whether or not Jim would be there. Her palm hit the fleece. As she suspected, it felt too quiet, too dark. Jim was a snorer, and all Fiona heard lying in their bed that night was the clinking of the miniature grandfather clock in the next room, the one her parents had given them for their wedding. She sat up and turned to examine the bare sheets, sheets that she had changed the evening before, once again covered in sweat. The hiking boots Jim kept by their dresser were gone, along with the corduroy jacket that usually hung on the coat rack on the back of the bedroom door. Fiona rested her right hand on her inflamed abdomen and attempted to push herself out of bed with her left. She managed, though barely, and waddled over to the dresser where she had taken her watch off to do the dishes after dinner. It was 3:30.

As she shuffled over to the window, Fiona noticed the full moon shining dimly into the bedroom, casting a shadow of her bare feet across the tiles of the hardwood floor. Outstretched in shades of grey across the floor, her toes resembled the fingers of an alien, Spielberg’s E.T.’s to be exact—long and knobby at the ends. She sat down on the blue cushion that decorated the rocking chair in a corner by the window and began to sway back and forth, slowly.

Two weeks earlier, while she was doing laundry, Fiona found a pair of women’s underwear in the inside pocket of Jim’s corduroy jacket, which she later noticed smelt subtly of coconut

perfume. Ironically, the thong answered a lot more questions than it raised—midnight disappearances, a lack of sex drive, both long before her late, third trimester. “I threw it in the garbage,” she recollected as she retold the story, “and scrubbed my hands for an hour afterwards, once with bleach. I can’t remember if I cried. I didn’t say anything to Jim. I wasn’t certain how I could even broach the topic.” Rocking back and forth in the chair, Fiona rested her stomach in her left palm and rubbed it with her right in a circular motion, breathing deeply, then softly crooning. “Rock a bye, baby, on the tree top. When the wind blows, the cradle will rock—”

When Jim learned of the news that April, he had been thrilled, ecstatic at the chance to teach *his son* how to play baseball and soccer. Fiona told him she didn’t want to know the sex of the baby until it was time, but a few months into the pregnancy, he peeked at the doctor’s chart. As it turned out, Jimmy wasn’t going to have the chance to do those things he wanted, yet at least. It was a girl.

From that moment forward, he grew distant, began sneaking out after he thought she had fallen asleep at night, and, sometimes, didn’t come home from work at all. Fiona questioned him about it once at dinner, suggesting that he had perhaps joined a local bowling league, if only to convince herself that her deepest fears were untrue.

“No, I’ve just been around... Tally-ho last night. Few drinks with some guys from work.”

“Oh. Do I know them?”

“No.”

“Oh—”

Jimmy kept his face in his plate, twirling the spaghetti around his fork until it began to unwind itself. Fiona turned around and got up to put the dirty dishes in the sink. Once she had the hot water running, she picked up a scrub brush and started furiously scouring the plate in her hands. She took a break from scrubbing once to talk.

“So Jim, I really like the name Sophia. What do you think?”

“It’s ugly.”

“Oh.”

The wind was brutal that night as Fiona sat in her rocking chair, staring out the window. She gazed at the tree branches being knocked against the glass—like a child’s fingernails slowly rapping against the top of an empty school desk, echoing, hollow. She could feel the wrinkles on her temples deepening. It was too quiet and her thoughts were too loud. So, she sang again, “Baby is drowsing, cozy and fair. Mother sits near in her rocking—”

But the word “chair” never left her lips. She curled over, drowning in a sharp pain shooting up through her abdomen, and another a few moments later. And when she looked down, her nightgown, from the waist down, was drenched in water and sweat.

* * *

I worked from my apartment on the 25th, the day before Thanksgiving. Commuting would have been a nightmare, and my company offered a half day option for its employees. I used the latter part of my day to do some baking—two apple pies and two pumpkin rolls, one of each to go to my soon-to-be in-laws and the others to be taken for desert at my aunt’s house. The pumpkin roll tradition was Fiona’s. The year before was the first I had a hand at it. It was December and Fiona argued that pumpkin rolls were hassle enough for Thanksgiving and certainly weren’t needed for Christmas. But since my cousin Shane and I were staid advocates of it, I took up the responsibility. It could’ve worked out better. Having been out of Fiona’s house for just a bit more than a year, my baking supplies were limited and I had to use a thirteen-by-nine cake pan to make the pumpkin part of the roll. The pumpkin, baked in that particular pan, rose to twice the height that it should have. It tasted fine, of course, but when it came time to roll the filling into the pumpkin, the cake cracked lengthwise in at least two very noticeable places. I attempted to use the

filling as glue, but it worked only until I transferred the desert to the appropriate Tupperware. When I brought it to dinner at my aunt's, despite appearances, both Gram and Fiona tried a piece.

"Oh, this is better than your mother's, Sophia!"

I smiled. But Fiona's face darkened.

"Thanks, Gram. I'm glad you like it. I couldn't quite figure out how to make it as thin as it should be. So, I'll have to work on that for next year."

"A cookie sheet," Fiona breathed between two mouthfuls of pumpkin roll.

"What? Really?"

Fiona swallowed.

"Yes, you should use a small cookie sheet."

"I'm not sure—my small cookie sheet is extra small, comparatively, I think. Could I use a medium?"

"Nope. Use the small one. With wax paper."

Naturally, I found myself incredulous of Fiona's instructions. On the first roll I attempted, I used a medium-sized cookie sheet. And sure enough, the roll was too thin, immediately cracking into five different pieces as I flipped it from the tray onto a damp, powdered-sugar-coated towel. The pieces seemed unsalvageable, and so I disposed of them and began a mixture for a second roll. The smaller cookie tray lined with wax paper worked impeccably, both for baking to the ideal thickness and removing easily. The subsequent two pumpkin rolls, I was proud to tell Fiona, came out of the oven flawless-looking. On the finished deserts, there was only one very thin crack across the top of each, and the filling held it together almost perfectly.

The apple pies, on the other hand, I found myself challenged by—not for their difficulty, but for the standard I was to match. I spoke with Fiona the Tuesday before to ask if my aunt needed anything for dinner. As I anticipated, she had been well-prepared, needing nothing, and I settled on

bringing a desert. Fiona, it seemed, had already baked every Thanksgiving desert one could imagine except for apple pie. It was not until after I suggested baking the pie that I realized it was Gram's tradition. For two hours, I searched the best-of-the-best apple pie recipes available on the Web. In the end, I settled on a "Grandma's Old-Fashioned" recipe, and it looked pristine. I doubt, by anyone's standard at our Thanksgiving table, that it lived up to Gram's. Or, at least, some small part of me prayed that it didn't.

When I arrived at Fiona's house in Pennsylvania later that night, she said hello and quickly stuffed my pie and roll in the fridge and went back to furiously scouring the dishes in the sink. I could see steam billowing up off of the sponge she was using.

"Did the roaster take revenge on you for cooking the turkey in it?"

"He screwed me over again."

"What?"

"Don't do that—you know what I'm talking about."

"Okay."

I took off my coat and hung it up in the closet with my scarf.

"Really, I've heard that before though."

"No. I have never said that before. I told him that never again in my entire life will I speak to him. I've wasted four years of my life. Four years."

I sat at the table, hovering in Fiona's silence for a few moments.

"Do you know that I've never owned a true piece of diamond jewelry before, except for your father's engagement ring? And we all know how that ended."

Her face was stonelike, her lips pressed in a thin line that advertised the seriousness behind them. She placed the roaster in the dish rack to dry after rinsing it under the scalding water. The

smoke surrounded the sink and rose around Fiona's upper body, escalating toward the ceiling light like the incense used in Church.

"God."

"What?"

"I burnt my thumb."

I couldn't help but chuckle a bit, and, when she saw my smile, Fiona did the same.

"You think that's funny? What is wrong with you?"

* * *

[Feb. 1992]

It was 4:00 in the morning when Fiona woke to the sound of one of Caroline's white, hand-painted chairs used throughout the house being smashed into one of the living room walls. She crept out of her bedroom on the second floor and peeked down the staircase to see the mess on the floor. Jim stumbled in a few moments earlier, turning on all of the downstairs lights and leaving the front door wide open, welcoming an icy breeze and dozens or more snowflakes, which flew, for a few moments, in circles in the air like petals blown off of a white dandelion. They settled on the tan carpet seconds later, melting into the background. Fiona sat down and watched in silence. From above, she saw the top of Jim's head bobbing about in circles and, every few seconds, his body teetering violently back and forth like a see-saw, his reliable right arm jerking about with a bottle of vodka in his hands. This was not the first such occurrence, and she would wait it out—watch him waver around like a bobblehead doll until he toppled onto the couch in his delirium, unable to stand. Then, same as last time, she would close and lock the front door and return to her bed.

Remarkably, Jim remained quiet for quite awhile, until Fiona noticed the door down the hall crack open, allowing light to flood the darkness of the shadows in the corridor where she sat.

Feeling panic crowd her eyes and lungs, she reached her left palm out toward her daughter, as if to stop what was inevitable.

“Mommy! It’s snowing. I woke up and I saw it’s snowing!”

“Sweetheart, go back to bed—”

“Did you see?” Running towards Fiona and hopping up her back, “Come see.”

“Honey, shh, please.”

“Why is it so cold in here?”

“Because it’s cold outside, Soph—”

And she knew that he would notice, that he would hear.

And he did. A few moments later, Jimmy’s green eyes met Fiona’s downward gaze, and she saw a flicker of something inside of him. Anger, perhaps, or lust. Or both. At first, he said nothing. He just stared at the both of us and began walking up the stairs.

“Dad—Mommy?”

“Come on sweetheart, we’re going to put you back in bed.”

“But—”

Fiona had taken a deep breath, paused in her recollection, then closed her eyes. Unable to look at me, she forced her lips to move again, “Jim stood towering over me, and I squeezed you tight, my babygirl. I was frozen, and you were all I had in the world.”

“Jim, what do you want?”

“Turtle, you wanna play? It’s snowing. You like snow.”

“I’m not sure. It’s dark out. Mommy told me—”

“Mommy told you? Mommy told you what?”

“I don’t like how you call me Turtle. That’s not my name.”

“Oh, that so?”

“Besides, it’s cold out. I’ll get sick—”

“Jimmy, leave her alone.”

He reached out and grabbed my back, tugging me away from her. She, too big; Jimmy, too strong, and Fiona could feel herself losing grip. He pulled me away and pressed me tight in his arms. For a moment, I stared into his eyes, Fiona remembered, green like his. When she pulled after me, before she saw it coming, she felt the sharp sting of the back of Jim’s hand on her cheek. Tears boiled beneath her eyes, and she lay fetal for a moment in the hall, hearing Jim’s voice, distant to her eardrums.

“Bitch, don’t tell me what to do. Well what about your bedroom then, Soph? That’s how you like to be called, right? That’s what mommy calls you? It’s warm in your room, ain’t it? I love you sweetheart, just like mommy does, and I want to play. This is a nice nightgown your mommy bought you, ain’t it—”

“Oh, God. Please, Jim—”

And then she saw the hiking boot between her eyes—a pale, yellowish Timberland. Those seconds protracted, and she heard a voice, distant and unfamiliar, crying and screaming—

“Mommy—”

“Let me go. I don’t want to.”

“Shut up, damn it!”

Fiona felt the heat of the tears on her cheeks. Jim had trouble keeping his balance, aligning his body with hers, but the boot barely missed her face, bruising her right shoulder so much as to render it immobile, leaving Fiona wailing in pain. As he started to walk down the hall, my six-year-old self in hand, toward the tiny chalkboard Fiona had used to decorate my name with teddy-bears and hearts, she stumbled up and over to the old rotary and dialed. *Emergency. Dad. There was pepper spray in the closet.* Hearing cuss words and a thud, Fiona dropped the receiver on its springs, running

toward the scene: I, lying amidst a tussled comforter on the bed; Jim, face down in a bean bag chair, a stuffed rabbit peeking out from beneath his shoulder. The bottle he was holding had tipped and soaked the carpet. The fumes of its contents wafted into Fiona's nose, stinging the walls of her sinus passages, and down the back of her throat. She could taste the vodka.

"Daddy took a sip of his water and fell over on Teddy. He smells funny."

"Let's go, sweetheart. Grab a pair of pants and a tee shirt. We're going to visit Grandpa."

Fiona shuffled us to the dresser, grabbing a handful of clothes, and out the bedroom door, carefully locking it behind us.

* * *

Christmas gift shopping was always a difficult tradition for me, particularly when it came to Fiona. I ordered a discounted Vera Bradley handbag at the beginning of the month and it arrived handsome and in plenty of time, but it felt like a cop out, and I went back to the drawing board. I took a few days off of work before Christmas Eve and drove to Pennsylvania to get some shopping done. Two days before the holiday, Ray called the house while Fiona was out running. I answered.

"Hey, Soph. Listen. I think Fiona may have changed her cell phone number. Could you hook me up with it?"

I hung up on him.

On Christmas Eve, he called back, this time her cell phone. A friend of a friend had traced the number for him. His mother had passed that day and, as he said, it'd been some time since he felt so alone. I overheard Fiona in the adjacent room.

"Do you need me to come out there? . . . Okay. I'll be right there."

She emerged with her jacket, shoes, and an umbrella to keep the snow flurries off of her hair. I hid my face behind my laptop screen. Feeling her eyes on me, I paused typing only to transfer my glare.

“You shouldn’t go—”

“I won’t be back late.”

“Or ignore me—”

But it was too late. The door had already shut behind her.

Alone, I hooked my laptop up to Fiona’s printer. It spewed out six sheets of paper at my command. I folded them up neatly and stuffed them inside a letter envelope I found in Fiona’s desk. Using a purple pen, I scrawled in cursive letters on the front of the envelope. I stuck it inside of a thin hardcover, which I wrapped in silver and gold paper and tied to a second package with bright red ribbon. I hid my handiwork on the mantle over the fireplace, just behind the snowman that held up Fiona’s stocking, and curled up in the corner of her couch. As I glided into a pair of tan pillows, the back of my shirt slid up somewhat, exposing my skin to the cool, slippery leather. I pulled a blue fleece hanging from the back of the couch over my legs and stared for a few minutes out the bay window. The snow was getting heavier as I noticed a red Jeep Cherokee pull into the driveway behind my Subaru. I smiled and bolted toward the door. When I opened it, a man in a black suit stepped out of the car, stretching his arms and legs.

“Jake!”

I ran down the concrete steps to the house, barefooted in a short-sleeve shirt, and hopped on his back.

“Whoa, take it easy there, Soph.”

“Can’t help it! I’m so happy you’re here.”

I jumped down, my feet stinging bitterly against the snow-dusted macadam. When we kissed, his lips tasted like hot cocoa and peanuts.

“I can’t believe it. I thought you wouldn’t be back from Japan for another week.”

He twirled a few strands of my strawberry blonde hair around his right index finger.

"I rearranged a few things—for you."

"I love you."

"Mm, I love you too."

"Now come inside where it's warm."

He grabbed my hand, leaving his luggage in the Jeep, and we took the stairs inside down to my old bedroom. Fiona returned an hour later while Jake and I were watching *Home Alone*, sipping more hot cocoa. When I heard the car pull into the driveway, I jumped up, hurdling over the back of the sofa and down the stairs to the garage. She shifted the car into park and turned off the engine, but when she didn't open the door, I got in the car with her. We sat in silence for a bit, me just indulging her need for company. Fiona was the first one to break the silence.

"I ended it."

"Good. Shall I ask why?"

"His mother passed two weeks ago—they already buried her. The cancer acted faster than they thought. He said it was the only way he could get me to talk to him again."

"Oh. Wow."

"Yea."

"Good for you."

She shook her head.

"Which part—being alone for Christmas, or the general broken heart?"

"Oh, come on. You have me. You have family, and a good life—let's enjoy it."

"Pf."

"Please? Jake's inside."

"Swell. Another happy couple in the world."

We didn't open our gifts until Christmas night, after dinner and a second round of my home-baked apple pie and pumpkin roll. We gathered on the floor around Fiona's six-foot tall pine, elegantly decorated in red and green glass balls, strings of cranberry, and white lights. I collected the stockings from the mantle and held them in my lap. Jake passed his gifts to Fiona and me first. There were two tiny boxes, unmistakably jewelry-box-shaped. I caught a glimpse of Fiona's smile out of the corner of my eye.

"You first," I directed.

"No, you first!"

"Fine, fine," Fiona exclaimed. "I'll do it."

But she was still smiling as she tore open the paper, and nearly the box with it. Inside was a pair of fourteen-carat gold, diamond-studded earrings.

"They're beautiful, Jake."

"Glad you like them. And I hope you'll find the right occasion—"

"Hell! I'll wear them now."

Fiona ran off to the bathroom, and I smiled. It was a long while since I had seen her quite so happy.

"I hope you don't mind," he whispered in my ear, referring to the slightly smaller diamonds in my box.

I mouthed him a *thank you* as Fiona came scurrying back to show off her dressed-up earlobes.

Fiona looked at me and then Jake, "They look good, don't they?"

Jake offered to start a fire in the fireplace. We sat for some time and chatted about our jobs and the upcoming wedding, savoring our company. Eventually, Jake opened my watch, and Fiona my Vera Bradley bag. Last, Jake and I opened Fiona's ice-cream maker. The snow was still falling

outside when we finished, and Jake was tired. I settled him into Fiona's guest room, lending him a toothbrush, blanket, and pillow. With a kiss goodnight, I wandered back to the living room, grabbing the packages from the mantle and lying down on the carpet in front of the fireplace with Fiona—discreetly placing the packages above my head, just out of Fiona's sight.

“Do you remember when I was six or seven, and you bought me all of those Dr. Seuss books?”

“Sure, why?”

“Well, you have another present.”

I pulled the brightly wrapped gift out from behind my head and handed it to her.

“Open it.”

She laughed.

“What is this? A joke?”

“Oh, just open it.”

We both sat up. Fiona tugged on the ribbon and tore open the wrapping paper on the first.

“*Oh, The Places You'll Go.*”

“Open it.”

She pulled out the envelope I slipped into the front cover the day before.

“What's this? —Mom?”

Fiona looked up.

“Please don't make me say it again.”

She pulled out the pages from the envelope and let them fall into her lap: Application for a U.S. Passport.

“Now open the other.”

She tore through the second silently.

"*Frommer's Ireland 2010*. How did you even get—now, what am I going to do with these—?"

"You've been talking about this for years. And Jake and I will be away in Italy for two weeks next June. It's perfect."

"Right. You just don't understand. The financial obligations. My Dad. All of these things—"

"These things, Mom, are excuses. Go. Take control of all of this. It will help."

"You have no idea."

Fiona stood up, stuffed the passport application into the guidebook, and gently tossed it into the fire. She tucked the Dr. Seuss book under her arm, pushed on her slippers, and walked down the hall toward her bedroom. I sat bewildered in front of the fire, watching the flames dance higher and higher, eating away at Frommer's.

* * *

Once in her bedroom, Fiona turned up the baseboard heat a notch, laid the book on the nightstand, pulled on a pair of pajama pants and a tee shirt, and crawled into the bed. The door of the guest bedroom, just across from hers, creaked open, footsteps pattering down the hall. First, she heard the echo of Sophia's voice, and then Jake's.

"You're awake?"

"Couldn't sleep."

The voices turned to whispers, the radio clicked on loudly, and almost instantly Fiona recognized the lyrics to "Baby, It's Cold Outside" in stereo sound. The volume decreased and the floorboards squeaked in the distance.

"Come on, dance with me," Sophia begged.

"Must I?" Jake moaned.

In a few moments, the unmistakable introductory notes to “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” seeped through the walls, and the echoes of Sophia’s and Jake’s voices disappeared into the night, the floorboards rocking and humming in the rhythm of Frank Sinatra’s voice.

Cringing backward into an array of pillows, Fiona flicked on the television with the remote on the nightstand and flipped through a few channels until momentarily settling on a black-and-white picture—a man standing on a bridge crying out in tears, “I want to live again. I want to live again. Please God, let me live again.” The old film played for a few moments, fading into the sounds of “Auld Lang Syne” as George Bailey, Bible in hand, stood in front of a Christmas tree with his wife and children.

Fiona shut off the television, got up, and lit a candle on the bureau. Returning to bed, she fluffed the pillows a bit, and laid there for a few moments, recalling the last night Ray had laid there next to her and all the nights since that she had slept there alone. And then pulled the book from the nightstand, folded it open in her lap, and started to read. *Congratulations. Today is your day.*